That Old-Time Portuguese Bread

Manuel G. Jardin

On September 30, 1878, a pioneer band of 180 Portuguese landed in Honolulu. Seven years later the number of such immigrants totaled more than 10,000.[1] Introduced as plantation laborers, they followed the classic pattern: When their contracts expired, they moved to town, concentrating in the Punchbowl and Pauoa districts. Here street names today commemorate their influx: Lusitana, Funchal, Lisbon and Azores; Alencastre, Madeira, Morreira and Magellan; Correa, Enos and Osorio.

Like all newcomers, the Portuguese enriched Hawaii's culture—and one of their most popular contributions was the toothsome *pão doçe*—sweet bread—now a favorite island delicacy. In the old days many Portuguese families had their own outdoor ovens *(forno)* in their backyards. For most housewives baking day came two or three times a week, but mothers of eight or more children fired the *forno* every 48 hours.

The average oven baked 12 loaves at a time; some monsters, though, could accommodate twice as many. Most of the ovens were made of stone and cement, with brick or smooth stones for the bed. Families unable to afford cement and brick resorted to rocks and adobe. The completed *forno* resembled an igloo. A typical one would be five and a half or six feet high, slightly conical at the top, with a circular base some five and a half feet in diameter. The walls of stone ovens were about six inches thick; those of brick were approximately three inches.

The oven rested on a solid base some three feet high. In the front of the oven, and on a line with the base, was a mouth about a foot square. This mouth, closed with a metal plate during baking, served both as a door to heat the interior and as an outlet for removing the finished product. Loaves were put in and taken out with a long-handled wooden spade.

Now let time roll back: It is, say, 1907; bread-baking is forecast. Little Manuel, a lad of 10 or so, joins older companions to do his share of the work—rustling firewood. The boys take a homemade wooden cart with iron wheels.

Manuel G. Jardin, a retired printer, pursues local history as a hobby; he already has several publications to his credit.

They head for the wilderness of Pacific Heights, to the mouth of Pauoa Valley; or perhaps along the slopes of Tantalus, around Papakolea. They search for two kinds of wood: boxwood or other light, quick-burning fuel to get the fire going, and guava or kiawe to hold a bed of hot coals. And on the way they keep a sharp eye out for nests of yellow-jacket wasps. The hives, if disturbed, will empty their inhabitants on the hapless youngsters. One wasp can sting a dozen times, and more than once the wood-hunters have been forced into a pain-wracked retreat. Stands of dry growth are always shaken before being entered.

But today their luck holds. The cart is soon loaded, and the expedition returns.

Yeast had been made the night before. Mother had taken a small piece of leavened dough, the size of a small bun, either got from a neighbor or left over from a previous baking, and preserved in flour until needed. She peeled and grated a medium-sized potato and put it into water with a heaping tablespoonful of Hawaiian salt. This mixture went into a quart jar with the seed yeast. The jar was covered with woolen cloths and kept in a warm room. In 10 or 12 hours the jar's contents had fermented and swelled to the top.

Now it is time to prepare the dough. Superior bread has crispy crust, fine texture, and mouth-watering flavor. Much depends on long and careful kneading. This done, the shaped loaves are popped into the waiting *forno*. When the baking is done, out comes the bread used daily at mealtime.

Sweet bread was something else. Cakes and pastries were beyond the means of Punchbowl and Pauoa dwellers, and the *pão doçe* was a treat reserved for weddings, baptisms, birthdays, anniversaries, and so forth.

Other delights that issued from the ovens were *massa suvada* and *malasadas*. The first of these, comparable to cake, was made to celebrate Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas. Easter was of special importance; at that time, when the uncooked loaves of *massa suvada* were nearly ready to be put into the oven, whole raw eggs were stuck halfway into them. Medium-sized loaves would have four or five eggs, while the larger might accommodate eight or ten. These special loaves with egg decorations were called *fulares*.

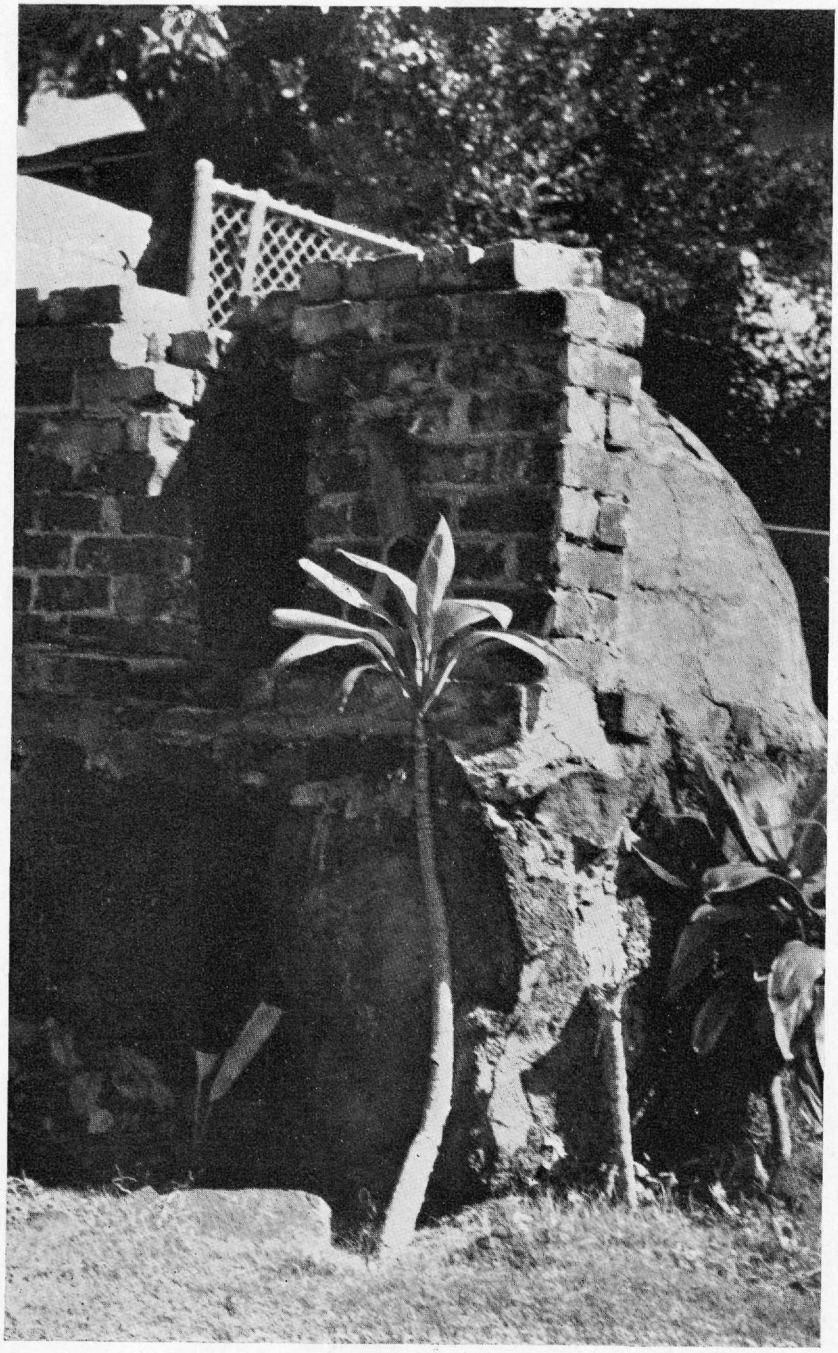
Malasadas, a variety of doughnut, were made only on Shrove Tuesday at the beginning of Lent. None but the choicest ingredients were used—flour, butter, eggs, salt, sugar, milk and yeast. An old-time, homemade *malasada* was far superior to the commercial product sold today.

As the Portuguese prospered and entered the main stream of island life, bakeries appeared to take over the functions of the backyard *forno*. Probably the first and largest bakery in Punchbowl, prior to 1900, was the Andrade Bakery. Louis Andrade was in business as early as 1895, located on School Street near Punchbowl Street. Two changes of address followed, and in 1910 Louis' widow, Mary, was carrying on the enterprise at 1467 Lusitana Street.

Andrade's success attracted competitors:

Silva Bakery, Manuel de Silva, on Kinau Street near Punchbowl Street. A going concern as early as 1900, the last record of its existence is dated 1905.

Vasconcellos Bakery, Victorino Vasconcellos, at 1508 Punchbowl Street. This bakery was operating by 1902; later the son, John, carried on at 1410 Lusitana Street. The last record of this business is dated 1910.



Neves Bakery, Manuel Neves, at 2004 Wilder Avenue, functioned in 1903 and 1904.

No records, apparently, commemorate the Alencastre, Baptiste, Nobriga or Rosa bakeries. Oldtimers, however, recall that these businesses once flourished in the shadow of Punchbowl.

Bread was the staple product of these Portuguese bakeries, at a standard price of ten cents a loaf; but tickets—and later tokens—lowered the cost to twelve loaves for $1.00. Horse and carriage delivery, always during the early morning hours, covered the area from Punahou out to Kalihi. Some of the bakeries provided *massa suvada* for the holiday trade; in such instances the loaves, larger than the everyday bread, were priced at 25 cents and 50 cents each.

Today it is possible to buy at least an imitation of some Portuguese baked goods. But they are the products of a mechanized age. The backyard *fornos* are gone now; soon they will not even be a memory. Indeed, a long search for a photograph of a *forno* very nearly proved fruitless. By good fortune, though, Mr. Edward P. Cabral heard of the problem and notified the writer that such an oven existed in his backyard at 3239 Mokihana Street, off Kapahulu Avenue. The oven was originally used by Mrs. Frank Gouveia, mother of Mrs. Cabral, but it has not been fired for more than 30 years and is now in less than prime condition. Nevertheless, it is pictured here as a relic of a vanished era.

NOTES

[1] W. D. Alexander, "History of Immigration to Hawaii," HAA for 1896, p. 118; PCA, Aug. 1, 1885, p. 2, c. 1.